fort de chartres

STATE PARK

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THE PARK

Fort de Chartres State Park, occupying the site of a former French fortress, was the seat of civil and military government in the Illinois Country for more than half a century. The 1100-acre park is 4 miles from Prairie du Rocher in the fertile Mississippi River valley.

The Park Ranger's offices and a Visitors' Center have been erected on the site of the original foundations of the stone warehouse. The Visitor's Center contains artifacts directly associated with the fort as well as many educational exhibits. The powder magazine, combined guards' house and chapel, and land or rear gate have also been reconstructed. The gateway was restored by the National Society, Daughters of the American Colonists, in cooperation with the State.

Shortly after Father Pere Marquette and Louis Jolliet traversed the Mississippi River in 1673, Sieur de LaSalle Robert Cavelier explored the region through which the river passed and laid claim to the entire valley in the name of Louis XIV of France. The settlers were drawn to this area because of the fertile bottom lands soil and the common belief among the French that the bluffs contained gold and silver. Very little precious metal was found so the people turned to agriculture and the fur trade.

FORT BUILT IN 1720

With colonization came the necessity for some form of civil and military rule to protect the interests of the French people. In the autumn of 1718, Pierre Duque de Boisbriant, who had been appointed Commandant of the Illinois Country by Louis XV, arrived at Kaskaskia with instructions to erect a permanent military post. He selected a site 18 miles north of Kaskaskia on the east bank of the Mississippi and built a strong wooden stockade, reinforced on the interior with earth removed during the excavation of the fort's moat. This was the first Fort de Chartres, completed in 1720 and named for the son of Phillip, Duke of Orleans, Regent of France. Exposed to the flood waters of the Mississippi, the fort quickly fell into disrepair.

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In 1727 the fort was rebuilt, but by 1732 it was so dilapidated that St. Ange the Commandant built a new wooden Fort de Chartres northwest of the first fort and farther from the river. By 1747, when a general Indian uprising and increased hostilities between French and British colonies in America seemed imminent, the second fort had badly deteriorated. Repairs were considered too costly and the garrison was withdrawn to Kaskaskia.

In 1751, the French again planned a strong fortification. The government selected Kaskaskia as the site, but the engineer in charge, Francois Saucier, chose a site between the ruins of the two wooden Forts de Chartres. Under the guidance of Saucier and the Commandant Jean Macarty, construction was started in 1753; three years later the structure was substantially completed.

Limestone was quarried from the bluffs north of Prairie du Rocher. The stone was numbered and conveyed across a small lake by boat and raft, and then loaded upon ox carts and carried to the construction site. The massive stone walls, 18 feet high and 3½ feet thick, enclosed about 4 acres. The two arched gateways were 15 feet high. From the gates, a stairway led to a lookout platform above, where two swivel cannons were placed.

Surrounding the fort was a dry moat which was never finished. At the tip of each corner bastion was a stone sentry box or lookout tower. Within the walls stood a warehouse and trading post, guards' house and chapel, government or commandant's house, two stone wells, a coach house with a pigeon coop on its roof, a stone flagpole platform, a building for officers, two long barracks for enlisted men, two stone and two wooden "necessary houses" (latrines), the powder magazine, kitchen and bake ovens and a prison containing four cells. The buildings were arranged around a central parade grounds. This Fort de Chartres was the pride of Louisiana, New France and the French kingdom as well. Ten years after its completion, it was described by an English officer as "the most commodious and best built fort in North America." It was capable of housing 400 men, although its garrison rarely exceeded half that number.

FRENCH RULE ENDED

In 1763, when the Treaty of Paris ended the French and Indian War, France ceded to England all her claimed lands east of the Mississippi except New Orleans. Thus French domination in America ended. The French garrison held Fort de Chartres until October 10, 1765, when British troops peaceably took possession. Renamed Fort Cavendish, this fort was the seat of British government in the Illinois Country until 1772, when it was abandoned and partially destroyed by the flooding Mississippi.

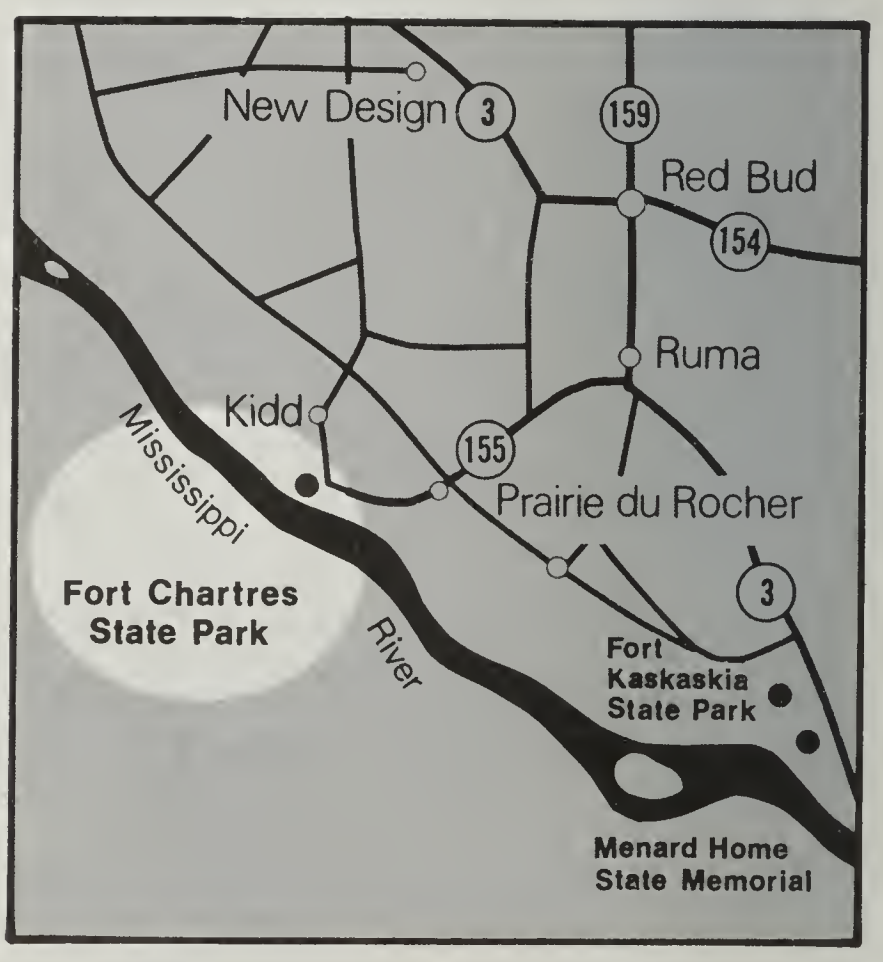
During the ensuing years, the remainder of the fort excepting the powder magazine was gradually dismantled by persons needing building stone and timbers for their own homes. In 1913, the site was acquired by the State of Illinois as a State Park. In 1970-71, additional lands containing the sites of the wooden forts, a French village and Church, French farm sites and an 18th century Indian village were acquired.

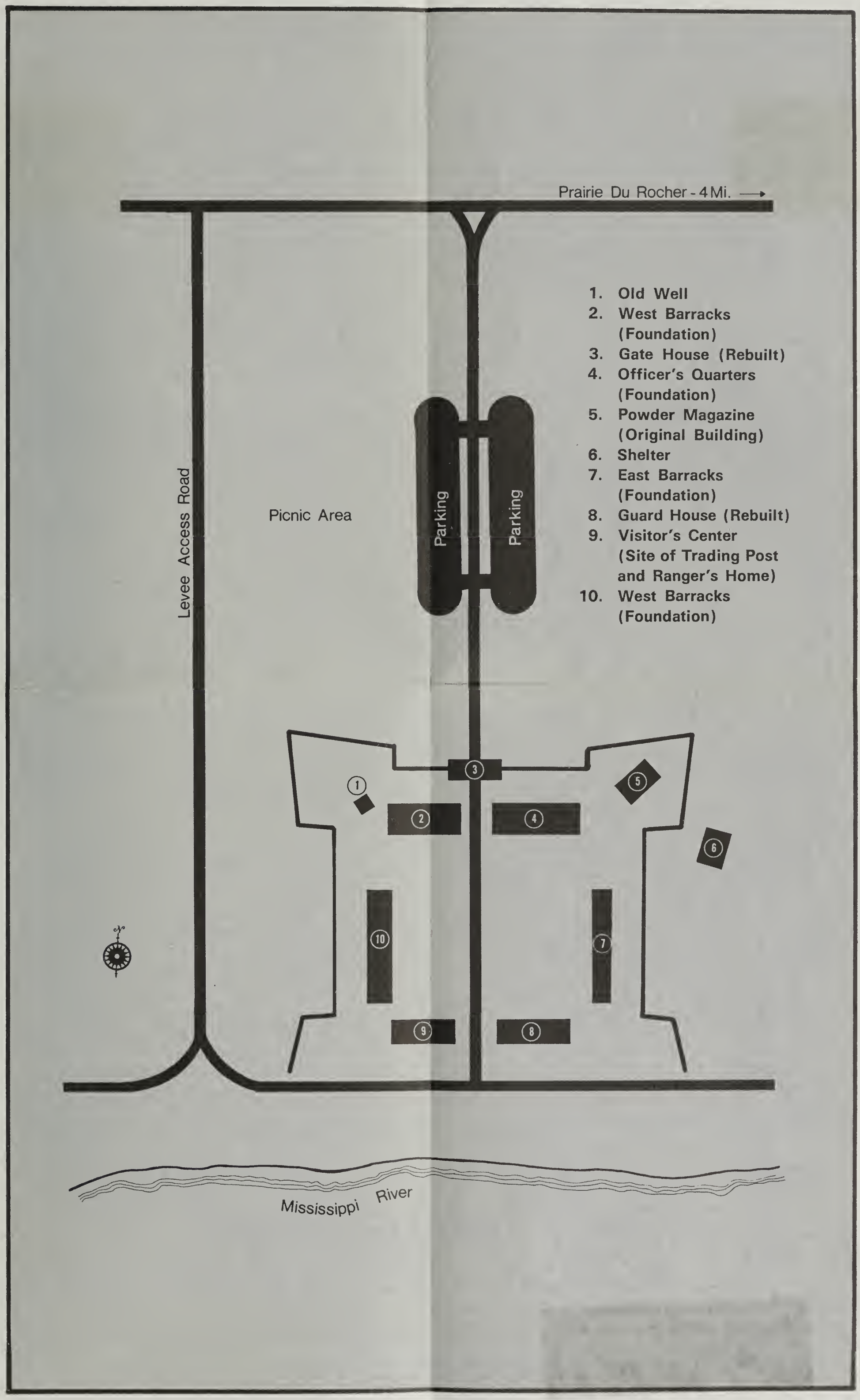
FACILITIES

Each June there is a Rendezvous at the park which re-creates the crafts and contests of the early French settlers here. Park facilities include a parking area for motorists at the entrance, toilets, drinking fountains, a concession stand, playground equipment and large, shady picnic areas around the outside of the stone fort. There are no camping facilities.

FOR YOUR INFORMATION

For more details about this site, contact Ranger, Prairie du Rocher, Illinois 62277, phone 618/284-3486. For information on other Illinois sites, write the Department of Conservation, Information/Education Section, State Office Building, Springfield, 62706.




Prairie Du Rocher - 4 Mi. ⟶
Levee Access Road
Picnic Area
Parking
Parking
1. Old Well
2. West Barracks (Foundation)
3. Gate House (Rebuilt)
4. Officer's Quarters (Foundation)
5. Powder Magazine (Original Building)
6. Shelter
7. East Barracks (Foundation)
8. Guard House (Rebuilt)
9. Visitor's Center (Site of Trading Post and Ranger's Home)
10. West Barracks (Foundation)
Mississippi River

Printed by authority of the State of Illinois
Issued by
DEPARTMENT OF CONSERVATION
Division of Parks and Memorials
50M-10-73

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